

The Ghost Detective

by Natalie Conyer

Winner: Body in the Library – Runner up

Scarlet Stiletto Awards 2025

The Ghost Detective

Lovesey appears at the door of his office, beckons. Ruby follows him in. He negotiates his bulk into the chair behind his desk. She perches opposite.

‘Got something for you,’ he says. ‘Ever heard of Forestville?’ Ruby shakes her head.

‘Little dot on the map up North. Middle of a pine forest. You must have heard of it. The haunted library?’ Something, a pilot light, flickers at the back of Ruby’s mind, goes out again.

‘Maybe. I don’t know every haunted place in the country. Fill me in.’

‘A guy called Samuel Dickson built a library in Forestville, or rather, had it built. Over a hundred years ago, when the timber industry was booming. The Dickson family owned most of the industry, and most of the town as well. They made a fortune from that forest,’ Lovesey says, ‘but then the government built a dam upstream, and that destroyed the town’s river access. Forestville became a backwoods.’

‘Get it?’ he adds. ‘Forestville? Backwoods?’

Ruby frowns. Lovesey clears his throat, continues.

‘Dickson built the library for his wife, name of Eugenia, who wanted some culture in the place. She ran it until one day someone found her body in the library. Stone dead. She’d fallen from an upper level and hit the back of her head. Apparently. Ruled an accident, but—’

Here Lovesey tilts his hand back and forth. ‘Rumour was the husband did her in but nobody could prove it. In any case, he married the housemaid almost at once.’

‘So?’ Ruby’s short on patience. ‘Ancient history. Get to the haunted part.’

‘After she died, people said her ghost was haunting the library. They claimed they saw her floating around, crying *Murder! Murder!*’

‘The place became famous.’

Finally, the penny drops.

‘Oh, yes!’ said Ruby. ‘The lady in the library. I think I did hear about it.’

‘Put Forestville on the map,’ Lovesey says. ‘People paid good money to be scared out of their skins by spending a night in the library, waiting to see Eugenia’s ghost. The town cashed in on it, too, while it lasted.’

‘Didn’t someone else die there?’ Ruby remembers now.

‘Yup. Two people. The first, 30 years after Eugenia. Found in

exactly the same place, with exactly the same head wound. This one a local female. The coroner ruled her death suicide, a sick homage to the original. Everyone knew this was a crock because it was highly unlikely the lady killed herself with a blow to the back of her own head, then positioned herself in exactly the same place as Eugenia. It had to be murder, and people believed the ghost was responsible. Sightseers flocked in.’

‘But the ghost herself disappeared. No sightings, and eventually the fuss died down. Forestville went back to being its sleepy self. Until, 30 years later, another body. A man, found in the same spot, in the same state as the other two. This time the death was ruled accidental. Word got out the ghost had struck again, and the town was back on the map for a while.’

‘That was 30 years ago,’ Ruby says. ‘What’s happened now?’

Lovesey acknowledges with a nod. ‘Three nights ago, another death. Body found in the same place, same condition as the others. A man again, young, name of Henry Christie.’

‘How come I haven’t heard about it?’

‘We’ve kept it out of the news for the time being, even social media. Can you imagine the panic if it gets out that ghosts kill people?’

‘Though we both know they do. Anyway, why does it have to be the ghost? Maybe Forestville’s got itself a serial killer?’

‘Operating over a hundred years? Unlikely. And impossible,

because the thing is—’ Lovesey leans forward, close enough for Ruby to smell peppermint breath, ‘the thing is, early on, the town made a rule. Anyone staying the night had to lock themselves in. Added to the thrill. No other doors or windows, so nobody could get in or out. If they died, it would be by accident, by their own hand or by Eugenia, taking revenge.

‘Upshot is,’ he adds, leaning back again, ‘you go to Forestville tomorrow. Story is you’re a homicide detective sent to review the investigation into Henry Christie’s death. Your real job is to stop Eugenia killing people and if she isn’t, stop whoever else is putting bodies in that library.’

‘And the police?’

Lovesey stands abruptly, hitches his belt over his belly.

‘Policeman. There’s only one. And no, he doesn’t know you’re a ghost detective.’

The drive from the airport is a long one and Ruby has time to think about being a ghost detective. The only one in the country: in the world, probably. The job suits her perfectly. She’s been interested in the unprovable, the unknowable, since childhood. Her doctoral thesis, *The Dark Centre: Ghosts, Spirits and the Case for Transcendence* had sunk without a murmur, or so she thought, until the call from The Centre. Would she come in for a chat? They’d explain when she got there.

There turned out to be a series of offices on the twenty-third floor of a bland block in the CBD. She dinged the bell on the empty reception desk and after a minute a door opened and a hefty, balding man appeared. He proffered his hand.

‘William Lovesey,’ he said.

The Centre’s full title, Lovesey explained, was The Paranormal Crime Centre. It investigated crimes outside the capabilities of other law enforcement agencies. Only two or three people outside The Centre knew of its existence and it had to stay that way. Ruby signed the Official Secrets Act, was introduced to her colleagues and began her career as a ghost detective.

Eventually Ruby sees civilisation in the distance. This must be Forestville, a huddle of pitched roofs nestled in a dark green, pine-dense valley. Up close, the village presents itself as a main street with houses straggling up the slopes behind. The nearest buildings are of stone: a town hall and a bank. A series of businesses follow. Less grand and built of wood, they’re interrupted by occasional boarded-up shopfronts, like bad teeth in a smile.

After them, like bookends, two more stone buildings. One is squat, with a faded sign saying Police. The other, facing it, is two-storied and has wide steps leading to a closed, ornamented double door. Its pediment declares it the *1920 Forestville Library*.

As Ruby pulls into a diagonal parking space in front of the police station, a man comes out of its front door. He must have been waiting for her. He's older, in his 60s, she supposes, and wears a bulky jacket with a fleece collar and a beanie pulled low over his ears. She steps out of her car to meet him and instantly understands the outfit. It's freezing, an icy wind burning her cheeks. She zips her puffer jacket to the neck.

Meanwhile, the man has stopped dead in his tracks. Ruby understands. He's expecting a big city cop, not a tiny young woman in jeans and an explosion of ginger curls. It isn't the first time she's had this reaction. Finally, he says, 'Chester Foley, Forestville police,' and puts out his hand.

They shake. Foley looks relieved. Perhaps he thinks she'll go easier on him than a man would.

He says, 'I'll take you to the *Forestville Inn*. We've booked a room for you.'

Ruby replies, 'Right now I'd like to look inside the library.'

Hesitation. 'You sure? It's getting late, and not much to see. We're meeting there tomorrow morning, in any case. I'm sure the mayor—'

'Nevertheless,' says Ruby. 'Got the key?'

Foley surrenders. 'Of course.' He indicates the building over the road and ushers her towards it. At the foot of the wide stone steps he extracts a shiny skeleton key from his pocket and inserts

it into the lock on the right side of the double doors. He twists, pushes softly. The door swings silently, smoothly open. The last of the daylight is fading. The library is dark inside and cold, nearly as cold as the street. Foley reaches forward and snaps on a series of switches. The interior comes alive in stages.

Ruby, not given to showing feelings, suppresses a gasp. She faces a single, two-storied room, the most beautiful room she's ever seen. Golden circles of light from a series of glass pendants gleam on dark wood, cast shadows on the black and white tiled floor. All the walls, from floor to ceiling, are lined with book-filled, wooden shelves. There are two levels, one on the ground floor, one above. The higher shelves are accessed by two spiral staircases, one on each side of the room. They lead to a walkway running across the three facing walls. Both staircase and walkway are fronted by a wooden railing, waist-high, with barley-twist supports. Shelves at both levels have movable ladders, so that people can reach the topmost books.

Reverently, Ruby steps forward. Facing her is a carved mahogany desk, three card catalogue cabinets by its side. Further in, at the centre of the room, is a large, square, wooden table, ringed by leather-upholstered chairs. Otherwise, the library is empty and this, together with the soft light and shadows, gives the place an eerie feeling. Here's a library from legend, from dreams. No wonder it's haunted. Or people think it is.

Ruby has forgotten Foley. Now he clears his throat, and she tries to shake off the atmosphere.

‘Show me where the bodies were found,’ she says. He leads her to the back of the room.

‘They ended up here. All of them. Fell from there.’ He points to the centre of the walkway above.

His head is angled upwards and, for the first time, Ruby has a chance to take him in. He’s muscular and raw handed. A man used to the outdoors. The hair straggling from his beanie is silver-grey. There’s an aura of kindness but Ruby, with the sixth sense she’s famous for, feels unhappiness, things he’s not saying.

She follows his gaze. The walkway’s high, but even if you climbed to the top of a movable ladder, it’s hardly high enough to guarantee death, if that’s what you’re after. If, on the other hand, you were flung over, the tiled floor would do the job.

‘The people who stay overnight,’ asks Ruby, ‘where do they sleep?’

‘They don’t,’ Foley replies. ‘They wait on the walkway, watching out for Eugenia Dickson. She’s supposed to appear up there, where she fell from.’

Ruby nods thoughtfully, doesn’t reply. Foley seems to run out of words and in silence they walk outside, into the cold wind. Ruby stamps her feet while Foley locks up. ‘The *Forestville Inn*, you said?’

The *Forestville Inn* turns out to be a mock-Tudor building a block or two up from Main Street. Like the houses they pass on the way, it needs work. Paint’s peeling, the wooden sign advertising Rooms hangs flapping on one hinge. The inside, too, is shabby but at least it’s warm. A fire burns bright inside the small living room. There, a large woman with a salt and pepper bun dislodges a cat from her lap, puts knitting to one side, and rises to greet her. She regards Ruby with frank disbelief.

‘You’re the cop?’

Ruby sets her backpack on the floor. ‘I’m the cop.’

‘Frances Foley,’ the woman says, not returning the smile. ‘I’ll show you the room.’

‘Foley? Like—’

Frances Foley purses her lips. ‘Chester’s my husband. He’ll be home later.’

‘This explains the lack of welcome,’ thinks Ruby. After all, she’s been sent to check on Frances’s husband.

In Ruby’s room heavy curtains are drawn against the night. The bed is piled with blankets, an eiderdown, a multicoloured crocheted throw. An oil heater keeps the room comfortable, and a huge, antique wardrobe stands open. Hello, Narnia! thinks Ruby.

‘Bathroom across the way,’ says Frances Foley. ‘Dinner on the stove.’

She turns to leave, but Ruby stops her. 'Wait. Henry Christie, the boy who died last week, did he stay here?'

'What of it?' Frances' tone has shifted from unfriendly to downright hostile.

'Just routine questions,' reassures Ruby, keeping her voice pleasant. 'Did you notice anything unusual about him, or did he say anything that might help our investigation?'

Frances pulls the edges of a hairy cardigan over her bust, folds her arms to keep it there. Shakes her head.

Ruby tries again. 'What was he like?'

Frances huffs. Looks one way, then the other, then words burst out of her as if someone's turned on a tap. 'Like a tramp. On a motor bike, long hair, clothes from God knows where. Rude! Laughed at us as if he knew something we didn't. No luggage. One night here and the library and then he was going to go. Smoked inside, though we clearly—' she catches herself and, arms folded tighter, says: 'If you want to eat, make it soon. We go to bed early.'

Ruby doesn't respond. She's interested in Frances's reaction.

Ruby is the only guest. After a filling, fatty, stew, she retires to her room. Tries to play online chess but Wi-Fi is patchy. So, she lies on the comfortable bed, fighting to keep awake. It's been a long day and it's not over yet. At eight she hears a car draw up, a door open, distant murmurs. Chester, she supposes.

When her phone says 11.30, she takes up her backpack. Winds a scarf around her neck and pulls her puffer hood up. It is going to be very cold. She puts on gloves, shoulders the pack, and opens her bedroom door.

Very quietly, Ruby makes her way out of the *Forestville Inn* – just a Yale lock – and walks down the hill to Main Street, her breath steaming in front of her. Though there is nobody to be seen she keeps to the shadows. The library entrance, thank goodness, is in darkness. Using her phone as a torch, she takes out her kit and, in a minute, has the door unlocked. She pushes the brass plate. The door swings open, and she's inside.

She makes her way to the back of the room, where the bodies were found, shucks off her backpack and takes from it what she will need. Candles, salt, the other thing. When everything's in position, she sits cross-legged in the centre of the pentagram and begins the incantation.

After a subdued breakfast, Ruby shoulders her backpack and she and Chester walk down to the library. Chester opens both sides of the double door, hooks them to stay open. The morning is frosty and bright and, although the sun streams in, the library still carries a weight, a darkness, into which it cannot reach. Ruby sees Chester shiver. He switches on the lights. Two men enter together. Both are short and plump and so alike Ruby can't help but think *Tweedledum* and *Tweedledee*. One of the men pushes forward.

‘Good morning and welcome to Forestville,’ he says. ‘I’m the mayor here. David Dickson at your service.’ He makes a quaint bow, almost clicks his heels.

The other man nudges alongside. ‘Roland Dickson. Bank manager by day, town treasurer by night.’ He chortles at his own joke. ‘And yes, David and I are related. We’re cousins.’

A woman joins them. She is smartly dressed and elegantly coiffed. David Dickson introduces her. ‘Elaine Wallace. Elaine runs our community programs.’

‘Not a Dickson, then?’ asks Ruby.

Elaine affects a silvery laugh. ‘Oh, my goodness. My mother was but she married an outsider. Just like Frances, with Chester here.’

David Dickson motions everyone to the centre table. When they are settled, he apologises for the lack of tea and coffee and adds, ‘So, Miss Le Roux, to business. How may we help you better understand the tragic event that has befallen our community?’

‘It’s Detective Le Roux’, says Ruby. ‘And surely you mean events?’

David Dickson inclines his head.

‘I can see you’ve done your homework, Detective. I know you’ve been sent to review the investigation into Henry Christie’s death, and I can tell you our view—’

He glances around the table, ‘is that everything, the replication of death, the impossibility of entry, points to a wicked ghost

wreaking vengeance on the living. Eugenia Dickson murdered Henry Christie, as well as the two unfortunate victims before him.’

He holds up a hand. ‘I know this must sound strange, even impossible, but what other explanation is there? So please ask all the questions you like.’

‘No need for questions,’ Ruby says. ‘I know exactly how Henry Christie died. Also how Eugenia Dickson died, and the two who followed her. Do you want to hear it?’

David Dickson huffs, says, ‘Go ahead.’

‘Let me tell you a story,’ Ruby begins, ‘about a town where things were going smoothly. People were well off, thanks to a thriving timber industry founded by Isaiah Dickson and expanded by his son and then his grandson, Samuel. Samuel, who married Eugenia, grew so rich that he built a library at her request. And what a beautiful library it is.’

‘The library was Eugenia’s pride and joy. Until, one morning, she was found dead inside it. An accident? Suicide? Or something worse? Nobody knew. Though fingers were pointed at Samuel Dickson, they didn’t probe too deeply. He was, after all, the beating heart of the town.

‘Soon after Eugenia’s death, people reported seeing her ghost. *Murder!* they cried. *Murder!* Word got around. Tourists came, ghost-hunters, to see for themselves. They brought money to Forestville, which had fallen on hard times. The town seized

the opportunity, sold tickets to see the haunted library, turned Eugenia's death into a scary funfair ride; even making people lock themselves in to give the whole thing an added frisson.

Roland Dickson interrupts, 'Don't see how this is relevant—'

Ruby speaks over him. 'But the public is fickle. Eugenia refused to appear and attendance dropped off. Until 30 years later, when a local woman was found exactly as Eugenia had been. This woman did commit suicide, by the way. Only she didn't die as Eugenia had. She didn't even die in the library. Someone in the town had a brainwave. If another body appeared in the library, and this death corresponded to the first one, the ghost could be blamed, and *business* to put it crassly, would improve. So her corpse was placed there, and the town waited.'

Ruby looks around her. The council – the Dickson cousins, Elaine, Chester Foley – seem immobilised.

She continues. 'And business did improve. The ghost rumour was revived, and Forestville applauded.'

Then, it happened again. No ghost. As before, the public lost interest and the town continued its slow decline. So, its citizens conferred and waited for a suitable candidate. This time it was a man. He too died, this time *in* the library and, as before, exactly as Eugenia had. Could he have been murdered? No, the town claimed; after all, he'd locked himself inside the library. All evidence pointed to the ghost.'

'Again, business boomed, and again, as years passed without the ghost being seen, it died off. Forestville suffered. It was time to choose the next victim.'

Roland Dickson, finding his voice, interrupts. 'I strongly object to—'

Ruby cuts him off. 'I'm nearly finished,' she says. 'A suitable candidate appeared. A drifter, a sneering, long-haired loner, who wouldn't be missed. And when his body was also found in the library with the same wounds in the same position, as the others, Eugenia would again bear the blame. And your town, Forestville, would get some more, much-needed, trade. That is what happened,' concludes Ruby. 'My aim now is to confirm Eugenia's innocence and clear her name.'

David Dickson is on his feet. His face is scarlet.

'Wait a minute!' he cries. 'You make these accusations without a scrap of hard evidence!'

He thrusts a finger at Ruby. 'Tell me how you plan to prove these – these *lies*!'

Ruby lays her hands flat on the table. 'You're right. I don't have much hard evidence. Only a duplicate key, far shinier than the century-old original, and cut to let someone into a supposedly impenetrable room. Only a well-oiled door, to allow silent entry to that room.'

She waits a beat. 'Thing is, I don't need evidence. I have an eyewitness.'

Elaine laughs without humour.

‘Oh, *please*. It would have to be someone over a hundred years old.’

‘Exactly. Eugenia Dickson. We spoke last night. She told me who murdered her and how a dead woman’s body was placed in the library, how two other people were brutally killed there and, of course, who murdered them. And before you accuse her again, she was telling the truth. Ghosts don’t lie. There’s no point.’

Elaine says, ‘So you’ve been communing with’ – she makes jazz hands – ‘a *ghost*? Pull the other one!’

‘Why is that hard to understand? After all, you’re accusing that same ghost of murder.’

David Dickson, still standing, buttons his coat. ‘I’ve heard enough. Whatever fable you’ve conjured up, good luck taking it to the state police. Not even the paying punters believe that woo-woo stuff. It’s a fun thrill, that’s all. Come, Roland, Elaine. Chester.’

He turns to go. The others begin to gather themselves.

Ruby lifts a forefinger. With a mighty crash, both sides of the thick wooden door fling themselves from their hooks and slam shut. David, who is closest, pushes at them, tries to open the door, cannot. He turns back.

‘What’s happening?’ he asks, astonished. ‘It’s locked.’

‘What’s happening,’ says Ruby, ‘is that Eugenia is giving you an ultimatum. Confess what your grandfather did, what your parents

and you yourselves did, and she will let us out of here. Otherwise, we stay here with her.’

Both Roland and Chester are battling the door. Chester tries his key but it doesn’t work. Roland says, ‘I don’t know how you managed this but open the door immediately or there will be consequences.’

‘I managed nothing. Eugenia Dickson shut that door and won’t open it again until you acknowledge her murder and clear her name.’

With that, the lights go off. The library is plunged into darkness, a blackness as solid and heavy as earth.

David says, his voice shaking, ‘Whatever you think you’re doing, *Stop!*’

Ruby feels it, a chill current of air sweeping through the room. Then, above their heads, there’s a faint fuzz of light which grows and grows and resolves itself into Eugenia.

This isn’t the Eugenia who came to Ruby last night, the drooping woman in pearls and cardigan. This is a larger-than-life, wild-haired, skeleton-faced harpy, an apparition designed to make hair turn white.

Ruby is impressed. She didn’t think Eugenia had it in her. Illuminated by unearthly light, the spectre stares down upon the group. It opens its arms wide, makes its fingers into claws. Elaine dives under the table. Roland and David clutch each other. Chester stands transfixed.

'I am Eugenia Dickson,' cries the ghost in a voice as hollow as hell. 'Come to take revenge on the family that caused my shame.

Roland Dickson, your grandfather stove in my head with a mallet. He was not punished. Will you now take his place? David Dickson, your father murdered a man in cold blood, here in the library, just to make money. Should I murder you now to make amends? Chester Foley, you allowed the Dicksons to force you to kill a young man who had done you no wrong. How will you pay for that?'

Chester drops to his knees. 'I'm prepared to pay,' he says, 'anything. Do what you must. I'm happy to confess, to get rid of the terrible guilt.'

'The rest of you,' Eugenia declares, 'are more to blame than he. You too must confess.'

There is no answer.

'Confess!'

Still no answer, and suddenly Eugenia hurls a bolt of flame, a tiny meteor, at David. It sets his hair on fire. He yelps, slaps at his head with his hands. Roland has joined Elaine under the table, but it seems to move aside of its own accord and they, too, are set alight.

And then the show begins. Drawers fly open. Cards shoot out of them and land everywhere. Books sail from the shelves, come raining down, an avalanche. Ladders march along the balcony,

their feet clattering hard on wood. Chairs hop in circles, dancing. Small flames, tiny bonfires, erupt throughout the room.

'Will you admit your crimes?' thunders the ghost.

A chorus of *yes!*, and *please!* and *help!* come from the three on the floor. The fires slowly die. The lights come back on, and Eugenia has disappeared.

Confessions are written and shakily signed. The library doors finally open and the Forestville Town Council scramble, as fast as they can, into the day. Only Chester Foley hesitates. He stops at the door, asks Ruby, 'Are you okay?'

'Yes' says Ruby. 'Thank you. Give me a moment. I'll join you at the Police Station.'

Ruby watches him go. Poor old Chester, she thinks, he'll be the scapegoat. He had the second key. She'll make sure the state police know he was following orders. Will that matter? She thinks not. She wonders how they'll deal with the murder that took place long before Chester came to Forestville, the one committed by the parents of its current citizens.

She walks to the back wall, says, 'Eugenia. Our plan worked. Your innocence is proven, your name cleared. You're free now, to move on.'

There is no answer and Ruby can tell, by the lightened air, the emptiness, that Eugenia has already left. She looks around, at the

mess of smouldering books and charred wood. What will happen to the library now? Will they burn it down? Or will they restore it, make it a centre of learning and pleasure, dedicate it to Eugenia Dickson?

Time will tell. Right now, she needs to get back to The Centre, make her report, and assure Lovesey there will not be another body in the library.

Natalie Conyer

The Melbourne Athenaeum Body-in-the-Library Library Runner-Up Award (\$750) was won by **Natalie Conyer** (Mosman, NSW) for ‘The Ghost Detective’. Natalie is a writer and a crime fiction tragic. She’s a serial Scarlet Stiletto offender, still chasing that elusive red shoe. It was this competition, in fact, that gave her the confidence to write. She’s published two novels, *Present Tense* and *Shadow City*, with a third to come in 2026. A collection of her short stories, *The Book Club & Other Stories*, was published by Clan Destine Press in 2024.